

# Community Visioning and Strategic Planning

## Description

Community Visioning is typically the beginning step of any planning process at all levels. The planning process can be broken into a hierarchy of three levels organized by the “altitude” in which you are viewing a community. Community visioning and strategic planning is the most basic and “generic” type of planning that views the community from a very high altitude where planners are able to see all aspects including physical, social, economic, and environmental issues. It does not get into specifics, but instead identifies overall goals for a community. Many communities use their strategic planning and visioning exercises as they descend in altitude to formulate their comprehensive plan which narrows the “big picture” ideas. As the planning process continues, the detail of plans zoom to a lower, more in depth view of individual streets, blocks, and parcels with the implementation of functional plans.

Below is the general process a community may choose to use to generate their community vision and strategic plan. It is only a guide for developing the vision and goals. Steps may be altered, deleted, or additional ones added.

### Step One: Beginning

All community visioning exercises and strategic plans begin by identifying the major issues the plan should address. To do this, community leaders begin by clarifying personnel roles and identifying the information that must be gathered to make sound decisions. Effective planning typically begins with the formation of a steering committee to guide the process and to make key decisions along the way.

### Step Two: Gauge the Situation

To construct its mission and vision, a community must take a focused look at its current conditions while also being aware of the future environment. In doing so, the community can assess not only its weaknesses but also the possible strengths that can be built upon. This gathered information will highlight the critical issues the community faces which the strategic plan must address. These pressing issues could include a variety of topics such as funding, changing regulations, unwanted development, depletion of resources, etc. Community visioning and strategic planning does not have to address every problem within a community, but should address five to ten key issues that may have the most effect on an area. From step two, communities should have compiled an extensive database of information including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and constraints that will aid in constructing an overall mission and vision.

### Step Three: Construct a Mission or Vision

With the basics complete, planners construct the overall mission and vision of the community. These two statements are the foundation of a strategic plan and communicate the purposefulness of the community to its citizens. A mission statement establishes the what, how, and why of a community’s work. The vision of a community presents what the future and success will look like. At the end of this step, draft mission and vision statements are written with the realization that they could change.

### Step Four: Develop Goals and Objectives

With the mission and vision established and a list of critical issues identified, communities can begin the strategy component of the plan. This is where solutions are generated. Each issue should be first addressed broadly with an overall strategy. These overall strategies form the basis for more specific goals, objectives, and action steps. The results of this step may include a list of desired functional plans such as transportation plans, parks and recreation plans, neighborhood plans, etc. that will focus on individual goals.

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## Step Five: Write the Plan

This step involves putting all of the prior discussions, findings, and results onto paper for approval and implementation. By doing so, this signifies that the plan is complete and therefore should be viewed as the guiding document for further development and actions of the community. It should be noted that community visions and strategic plans are useful for setting a direction for land use and development, but they are not legal documents that allow planning or zoning.

Visions and strategic plans help to streamline future planning initiatives because they act as a backbone to ensure better and more efficient planning and development results. As new plans are created, planners should re-familiarize themselves with what the community has already established to be their overall goals and objects. This will guarantee that any new plans coincide with previous decisions.

Community involvement is the key to success in every planning initiative. Each planning enterprise should begin with a basic community visioning activity before any major decisions are made about the project. This tool provides a context for decision-making and allows citizens to realize the impacts of development in their community so they can provide meaningful input regarding what will happen in the future to a site, neighborhood, or entire community.

Community visioning processes and strategic planning can be open to all citizens, but is often led by a core group within the community. These people may include elected officials, civic organizations, key landowners, and investors. This group of key stakeholders should then allow for public input through a variety of means such as public meetings, workshops, open houses, interviews, and surveys. Strong efforts should be made to ensure that under represented populations are included in the process such as minorities or people who speak a foreign language. During all these activities, extensive notes should be taken to ensure that all community comments and ideas are reflected in the final results.

From the meetings, interviews, surveys, etc., the final product of community visioning and strategic planning should be quickly formulated. Communities like to see fast results from their participation rather than a long drawn out process that takes months or years to complete. This final product is usually organized under common themes that address the issues that were identified during the public involvement. The final vision is typically presented in an easy to read and eye catching document that includes many pictures, quotes, and ideas from the citizens in order to give them “ownership” of the document.

Community visioning and strategic planning is never complete. There is a constant process of evaluation that is the responsibility of the core community group. Through the planning process, the vision will need to be changed; therefore, allowing the opportunity for more public participation and input.

## Relevant Statutes

Community visioning and strategic planning do not require any specialized capacity and are not regulated by any type of Indiana law or code.

## Capacity Recommendations

This tool can be used by communities with all levels of planning capacity. Many communities would find it useful to focus on completing community visioning and strategic planning before utilizing larger and more involved tools. This tool can be used in areas with or without planning and zoning. Community visioning can be incorporated into various other planning efforts, such as comprehensive planning.

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## Guidelines / Considerations for Implementation

- Visioning process should be quick for public to see immediate results.
- Establish a schedule for progress reports and continuous evaluation.
- Be inclusive of all community citizens
- Underrepresented groups should be contacted and extra efforts should be made to include them in the visioning process.
- In order for a plan to work, there are some key things that must be addressed when implementing a strategic plan. Some keys to creating a successful strategic plan are listed below.
  - o Include certain “stepping stones” or evaluation points to measure progress and success.
  - o Identify specific responsibilities for individual people or organizations involved in the implementation process.
  - o Be sure to address critical or controversial issues instead of pushing them aside or tabling them for future discussions.
  - o Do not be too narrow or detailed. As issues change, the plan’s recommendations may become obsolete.
  - o Do not be afraid to dream of higher goals and possibilities, but still remain grounded by the reality of what will happen.
  - o Remind the community of the mission and vision frequently through meetings, mailings, press, etc. so as not to lose focus.
  - o Include a large amount of public participation and guidance. The larger the involvement and support, the more likely the plan will succeed.
  - o Establish deadlines, timeframes, and accountability to push project objectives along instead of allowing the plan to sit on a shelf.

## Example Ordinances

No example ordinances are available for this tool

## Example Studies

- **Elkhart County, IN – Horizon Project:** The Horizon Project is a countywide visioning and development planning process which was initiated in the summer of 2002 and is now moving into the implementation phase. This website presents a review of the organization, the process, and the results of this broad-based community planning effort. Elkhart County Horizon Project. [\[http://www.elkhartcountyhorizonproject.org/\]](http://www.elkhartcountyhorizonproject.org/)
- **City of Valparaiso, IN – Strategic Plan:** Valparaiso’s Strategic Plan addresses many of the typical issues that smaller growing communities face, such as education, transportation, community involvement, public safety, economic development, and infrastructure. This strategic planning approach does not include the traditional formatting of establishing a concrete mission and vision with listed goals and objectives. Instead it addresses values and priorities the city wishes to address and then lists details which relate to the schools, parks, neighborhoods, etc. City of Valparaiso Strategic Plan. [\[http://www.ci.valparaiso.in.us/government/Mayor/StrategicPlanFINAL2005.pdf\]](http://www.ci.valparaiso.in.us/government/Mayor/StrategicPlanFINAL2005.pdf)
- **Lafayette and West Lafayette, IN – Vision 2020:** The two cities joined together to create a vision that looked 20 years into the future and is reviewed and updated annually by a group of community members. This vision establishes a list of community goals and action steps to implement them. The vision is accessible by both a website format and in a printable form. Lafayette Vision 2020. [\[http://www.ourvision2020.com/index.htm\]](http://www.ourvision2020.com/index.htm)

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## Helpful References and Links

- **Guide to Rural Community Strategic Planning – USDA Rural Development:** This is a guide for smaller and rural communities to complete a strategic planning process. Created by the United States Department of Agriculture, it includes a step by step process of developing the Strategic Plan, implementing its recommendations, and evaluating its success. [\[http://www.ezec.gov/About/strategic.pdf\]](http://www.ezec.gov/About/strategic.pdf)
- **Indiana Association for Community Economic Development – Planning:** This website offers examples of mission statements as well as a worksheet to guide the creation of a mission statement. [\[http://www.iaced.org/subpage.asp?p=117\]](http://www.iaced.org/subpage.asp?p=117)
- **Purdue Extension – Developing Mission and Vision Statements:** Although this document deals more with developing mission and vision statements for private businesses, the principles of the process are very similar for a community. Included in this report are helpful exercises and forms for communities to complete as well as examples of vision and mission statements. [\[http://www.ces.purdue.edu/extmedia/EC/EC-720.pdf\]](http://www.ces.purdue.edu/extmedia/EC/EC-720.pdf)

## Helpful Contacts

- **Association of Indiana Counties** is a nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance and training for county officials and employees.

101 West Ohio Street, Suite 1575,  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
phone: 317.684.3710  
Fax: 317.684.3713  
[www.indianacounties.org](http://www.indianacounties.org)  
[aic@indianacounties.org](mailto:aic@indianacounties.org)

- **Community Based Projects (CBP)** – Ball State University's College of Architecture and Planning hosts an outreach and service program using students for fairly elementary technical assistance on a variety of small town and rural issues, including comprehensive plans.

Community Based Projects  
College of Architecture and Planning  
Ball State University  
Muncie, IN 47306  
(765) 285-1350  
[cbp@bsu.edu](mailto:cbp@bsu.edu)  
<http://www.bsu.edu/cbp/>

- **Ball State University Center for Economic and Community Development** is a statewide public service unit of Ball State. The mission of the center is to help build self-sufficient communities within Indiana by increasing knowledge and capabilities of local professionals, government officials, and citizens.

Phone: (765) 285-1588  
Fax: (765) 285-4989  
<http://www.bsu.edu/cecd/>  
[cecd@bsu.edu](mailto:cecd@bsu.edu)

## Community Visioning and Strategic Planning

- **Center for Urban Policy and the Environment** – As part of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at IUPUI, this organization can assist in a variety of planning related matters.

334 N. Senate Avenue,  
Suite 300  
Indianapolis, IN 46204  
Tel: 317-261-3000  
Fax: 317-261-3050  
urbanctr@iupui.edu

<http://www.urbancenter.iupui.edu/AboutTheCenter/>

- **Purdue Cooperative Extension Service:** Community Development Division

Sam Cordes  
Purdue University  
1201 West State Street  
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2057

Phone: 765-494-7273  
Toll Free: 877-882-PCRD (7273)  
Fax: 765-494-9870  
smcordes@purdue.edu

### Other Possible Funding Sources

- **Local community foundations:** <http://www.indianagrantsmakers.org/locator/>

### Program Objectives and Issues Addressed

- Establishing Planning Capacity
- Growth Management
- Vision or direction of growth
- Growth and development
- Sprawl
- Public participation
- Lack of community camaraderie